A Room of One's Own

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF VIRGINIA WOOLF

Virginia Stephen was born into a wealthy and well-connected London family. Her father was Sir Leslie Stephen, a renowned critic and her mother was Julia Stephen, a beautiful woman who often modeled for portraits. Her mother died when Virginia was young, her brother also died tragically and her father died when she was 22. These events had a huge impact on Virginia's mental health and she was thereafter often treated for nervous breakdowns. In her youth, she was restricted from the level of education her brothers received but she learned as best she could and was soon surrounded by a group of intellectuals from the Cambridge colleges her brothers attended. With her siblings and friends, Virginia formed the Bloomsbury Group, dedicated to art, literature, politics and discussion. Leonard Woolf was one of the group and Virginia married him in 1912; the pair shared a long marriage, but the Bloomsbury group was famously liberal, politically and sexually, and Virginia also fell for Vita Sackville-West, who inspired the novel *Orlando*. She published her first novel, The *Voyage Out*, in 1915, and wrote continuously up to the year of her death, publishing her most famous novels (*Mrs. Dalloway*, *To The Lighthouse*, and *Orlando*) between 1925 and 1928. She also wrote and delivered the lectures that became *A Room of One's Own* in 1928. Virginia's health continued to plague her through her life, and she eventually committed suicide at the age of 59.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The lectures were conceived by Woolf around the time that the law finally changed in Britain to allow women the vote. This monumental event came after years of struggle and gradual progress that Virginia was significantly influenced by as a woman and as a writer.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Other writers of creative non-fiction, where argument, narrative and poetry collide as in *A Room of One's Own* include Michel de Montaigne, Ralph Waldo Emerson and more recently, David Foster Wallace. Woolf's essays also paved the way for later women writers like Joyce Carol Oates and Susan Sontag to share their personal views in essays and memoirs.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *A Room of One's Own*
- **When Written:** 1928
- **Where Written:** Cambridge, England
- **When Published:** 24 October 1929
- **Literary Period:** Modernism, Feminism
- **Genre:** Feminism, Essay
- **Setting:** The narrator depicts a particular day in fictional university of Oxbridge, inspired by the quadrangles and impassable lawns of Oxford and Cambridge.
- **Point of View:** Woolf speaks to the audience as herself but also sometimes assumes a first person narrator to describe the events of the days leading up to the lecture.

EXTRA CREDIT

Four Marys. The four Mary characters that Woolf uses to make her points are inspired by the four ladies-in-waiting of the Queen of Scots, about whom a popular rhyme was written.

Judith's Legacy. The image of Judith Shakespeare's suicide was one of the most influential to come out of *A Room of One's Own*. The rock band The Smiths wrote a song about a girl committing suicide called "Shakespeare's Sister" based on Woolf's character.

PLOT SUMMARY

Woolf has been asked to talk to a group of young women scholars on the subject of Women and Fiction. Her thesis is that a woman needs "money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction." She will now try to show how she has come to this conclusion, deciding that the only way she can impart any truth is to describe her own experience. So she adopts the voice of a narrator. The name of this narrator is unimportant, since she represents every woman.

The narrator begins by narrating her day at a college of the fictional university Oxbridge (a combination of Oxford and Cambridge). Trying to compose her lecture, she seizes upon some important thought and rushes across one of the college lawns but is stopped by a Beadle, a guard, who tells her that the lawn is reserved for Fellows and Scholars. She is shut out of several other areas in the same way before going to a lunch party, where she is inspired by the bright conversation of the men and women there. Later, she eats dinner at the fictional women's college Fernham. The meal here is quite different, the fare simple and the conversation gossipy and uninteresting. Reflecting on her day, the narrator realizes that women have been shut out of education and the financial and intellectual legacy that men have always had access to.

The next day, the narrator goes to the British Library and finds that it is a masculine institution through and through. There are shelves of writing by men about women, but she detects anger as well as curiosity in the men's scholarship. She theorizes that women have been a mirror in which men have always seen themselves enlarged and strengthened, and that men have used their literature and scholarship to affirm the inferiority of women mostly to protect their own superiority.

Looking back on the legacy of women writers, the narrator finds that there is hardly any information about the average woman's life, what she did, what she liked, and so on. So she invents the story of William Shakespeare's sister, Judith Shakespeare, a woman with the potential for genius, but who is never able to write a word and ends up committing suicide because of the way that society is structured against women.

But now, the narrator asserts, it has become possible for women to write. The narrator lists the history of women writers and their influences on each other. With each generation, women should get closer to being able to write the "incandescent" poetry that Shakespeare was able to achieve. But the library of literature produced by women so far is fraught with bitter, twisted writing, stories that are unable to rise above the poverty and limitations imposed on their sex and flow freely.

Having provided this history, Woolf sheds her persona and considers how she will conclude her lecture with an inspiring call to action. She charges the women of Newnham and Girton colleges—her audience—to create a legacy for their daughters. She believes that fiction is for the common good, not just the individual good, that there is something universal and powerful and good in it, and so she charges them to write voraciously. She conjures the image of Judith Shakespeare lying dead, buried beneath the streets of a poor borough of London, but says all is not lost for this tragic character. Since poets never really die, but are reinterpreted and given life by others, the women in her audience have the opportunity to bring Judith to life and create the history that Judith never had.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Virginia Woolf – Woolf, of course, is not a character in her lecture. But by creating a narrator to carry the bulk of her lecture, she makes explicit her own role as author and creates a separation between herself and the ideas of the narrator, and the importance of fiction in communicating inner experience (since she relies on the narrator to communicate these ideas rather than doing so herself. Woolf essentially introduces the narrator at the beginning of the lecture and then takes over from the narrator at the end of the novel to provide closing remarks.

The Narrator – To tell her story and make her argument, Woolf invents a narrator who she says could be any woman, "call me Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael or by any name you please—it is not a matter of any importance," she says. This narrator guides the audience (and reader) visually and intellectually through a series of experiences in which she learns how women have been poor and why. The anonymity of the narrator and her ability to sympathize not just with women but with men gives her a sense of authority and, at the same time, a sense of being a person rather than being a woman, a point of view she advises her audience to assume if they are to become good writers.

Judith Shakespeare – is the imagined sister of William Shakespeare. Woolf creates her to show how a woman with talent equal to Shakespeare would not, because of the structure of society, be able to achieve the same success. Judith's life is fraught with tragedy – first pressured by her family into an early marriage, she must escape to London to free herself to pursue art, but is turned away with scorn from every theatre she approaches. She becomes pregnant, which makes a life of writing impossible, and she eventually kills herself. But later in the essay, Woolf brings back the ghost of Judith Shakespeare and tells the young women in the audience that they have the power to be the voice that Judith never had.

Mary Beton – is the narrator's aunt, whose death has afforded the narrator a generous allowance of five hundred pounds a year. The narrator lives very comfortably on this sum and financial security has taught her a lot about the importance of money and why women have suffered intellectual and creative poverty as well as material poverty.

Mary Carmichael – is the imagined author of a book called "Life's Adventure" which the narrator reads and criticizes for its broken sentences that fail to emulate the master of sentences, Jane Austen. Despite her obvious lack of genius though, Carmichael does provide the narrator with the first confession of lesbianism that she has seen in fiction and shows how far women and fiction have come.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Mary Seton is the narrator's friend, studying at Fernham College, with whom she shares a simple college meal and discusses the history of the under-funded women's college.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

FINANCIAL AND INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM

The title of Woolf's essay is a key part of her thesis: that a woman needs money and a room of her own if she is to be able to write. Woolf argues that a woman needs financial freedom so as to be able to control her own space and life—to be unhindered by interruptions and sacrifices—in order to gain intellectual freedom and therefore be able to write. Further, she argues that such financial and intellectual freedom has historically been kept from women, with the result that nearly all women, even those with literary talent and ambition, are unable to achieve their goals or potential because of a lack of opportunity to engage in sustained work and thought.

As the narrator, Woolf examines her own life and the financial inheritance she received from her aunt, which gave her "five hundred a year", a very respectable sum for a young woman to live on. So, unlike women of lower class or without such good fortune, she was able to look forward to life of financial security and could actually focus on writing. She then imagines the fate of women without such a secure, personal income, imagines how impossible the task of writing would seem even if one had the ambition to do it. The rare examples she is able to cite of middle-class or lower-class women who decided to write, Aphra Behn for example, were not even seen as admirable women by society, and were instead belittled and thought almost unnatural. Because of that, Behn was seen not as a model for younger women to follow but rather a deterrent against a life of "living by one's wits."

It is abundantly clear throughout the lectures that Woolf is not just making this argument to express her own views or to tell a story – she sees herself as having a job to do, and it is no coincidence that she is speaking in front of a group of scholarly young women with their professional lives ahead of them. Woolf makes sure that she directs her argument to these young women in the hope that they will decide to change the fate of the next generation of women by providing them with a literary legacy and good fortune.

WOMEN AND SOCIETY

In addition to establishing the necessity for women to have financial and intellectual independence if they are to be able to truly contribute to the literary canon, Woolf addresses the societal factors that deny women those opportunities. As such, *A Room of One's Own* is a feminist text. But it does not assign blame for the state of society to particular men or as a conscious effort by men as a whole to suppress women. Rather, she describes a society formed by the instincts of the different sexes (for example women to have children, marry early, be tasked with mending and caring for the family and not being educated) that together define society and together influence individual's behaviors and opportunities.

This is not to say that Woolf sees society as being anything other than dramatically tilted in favor of men. She explores just how it is tilted, in two ways. First, she shows how she herself has been shut out of the fictional college "Oxbridge", an amalgamation of the two elite English universities Oxford and Cambridge. For Woolf herself, this "Oxbridge" idea was significant in her life; her brothers and male contemporaries all seemed to go off to Oxbridge while she tried to challenge herself and educate herself with what little external resources she had. Second, she creates an imaginary woman named Judith Shakespeare, sister of William Shakespeare and his equal in talent. She then shows how, while William rises to fame and becomes an "incandescent" poet, Judith is prevented by the structure of society from doing so and ends up committing suicide.

A Room of One's Own also examines the more taboo realm of female homosexuality, speaking honestly about the possibility of a woman's affection for women. By putting this usually silenced topic before her audience, she creates an atmosphere where feelings and taboos are able to surface and be expressed, and moreover are able to become commonplace and understood as a normal part of womanhood. It is also worth noting that while *A Room of One's Own* does not seek to blame men, when describing men it betrays a definite physical distaste at times. In her description of the men at the British Library for instance, they are a ruddy, almost disgusting presence, reminding her of all the flaws she sees in society as a whole.

Finally, it should be kept in mind that *A Room of One's Own* was crafted out of a series of lectures that Woolf delivered to women at the first women's colleges at Cambridge. With herself and those before her, Woolf creates a sense of a new community of women emerging, the educated, even professorial woman to match the naturally professorial man. This is a message of hope but also a warning and an incitement, that in order to change at all the fragile position of women in literature, this generation must forcibly change it.

CREATING A LEGACY OF WOMEN WRITERS

A Room of One's Own was fashioned out of a series of lectures that Woolf delivered to groups of students at Cambridge women's' colleges. She addresses these women explicitly and draws on certain assumptions and common knowledge—that they are all learned for example and that they're women—so we immediately have to consider the particularity of the occasion when reading the text. As a successful woman, Woolf stands before these women scholars as their elder and somewhat superior but also as their compatriot. They are allies in the same cause, to become educated women and contribute to their society and the canon

of scholarship and literature that inspires them.

Woolf is aware throughout that she, and these lectures, are part of the legacy and history of women writers (and thwarted women writers). From that starting point, of her as participating in a kind of legacy and offering something to the minds of the future, Woolf as the narrator invokes the women writers of the past and present to help her make her argument. From real authors like George Eliot and Lady Winchilsea to the invented Mary and Judith Shakespeare characters, Woolf presents a network of women who've missed out on their potential because of their status as women and the conditions of poverty and lack of education that that status implies. By creating an imaginary sister for Shakespeare, Woolf emphasizes the anonymity and invisibility of women; she makes us imagine many more forgotten women that history has left behind and whose minds will never be expressed.

Woolf describes male geniuses like Shakespeare as incandescent figures, known entirely by virtue of their work and not by their own lives. Woolf shows that it is very difficult for women to be this way, because their lives necessarily impose on them to such a degree, with childbearing, with homemaking, and with suffering. Therefore both women's fiction and the women themselves are defined by their deprivations rather than being incandescent, like the major male writers.

Woolf claims that as well as all the social conditions that have inhibited women, it is also this lack of history and legacy that continues to inhibit them, This is why she appeals to the young women before her: to use their education to be a different kind of generation and to create a history for their daughters like young men have always had to admire and emulate.

TRUTH

Beneath Woolf's argument about what it takes for a woman to create fiction is another more universal argument about the nature of truth, which inevitably casts a shadow over the points she makes. Woolf seems to realize two main points about the nature of truth that she passes on to her audience.

The first point has to do with is subjectivity. As a lecturer, she says she hopes that her listeners find some truth in what she is saying, but she doesn't claim to be able to impart it herself. She claims that all truth is a kind of experience and is subjective. She hopes to impart something truthful, not by stating facts or beliefs but by showing her experience and perspective and, in doing so, perhaps the listener can deduce something true. She goes about the essay in this vein, describing with an "I" voice the sensory and mental processes of her day.

The second point is that the quest for truth connects her with *both* the women and men in her story. As the narrator finds herself shut out of college buildings and women writers absent on the library shelves, she observes the extent of the intellectual life around her and, indeed, in front of her in the form of the women of Newnham and Girton whom she is addressing. Her pursuit of knowledge and her taste for debate and intellectual expression connects her with those around her, including the male 'professor' types who have been so supported by society.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in blue text throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN

The image of a room that the woman writer can own and use to write in, away from the demands of traditional womanhood, is a powerful and vivid symbol of the life of intellectual freedom Woolf is championing for the women attending her lectures. Woolf describes the forgotten women, the women unable to live up to their artistic potential, as inhabiting busy family spaces and always living dependent upon men rather than owning their own property. She therefore sees a room of one's own as representing the quintessential needs of future women writers if they are to create their own literary legacy.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Harcourt edition of *A Room of One's Own* published in 1989.

Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ All I could do was to offer you an opinion upon one minor point—a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction; and that, as you will see, leaves the great problem of the true nature of woman and the true nature of fiction unsolved.

Related Characters: Virginia Woolf (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

Woolf has been asked to give a speech on the topic of

women and fiction, and here she admits that her speech will be limited to "an opinion upon one minor point" related to this issue. She explains that she believes a woman must have money and "a room of her own" to write fiction––two things which, historically, extremely few women have possessed. The fact that Woolf presents her main argument right at the beginning of her speech highlights the way in which this argument is both simple and non-negotiable. While other writers and philosophers had invented much more complex explanations for why there were so few female authors in comparison to male ones, Woolf insists that the only valid explanation is the socioeconomic subordination of women.

Woolf seems to intentionally downplay the weight of her argument by saying "All I could do was to offer you an opinion upon a minor point." This may be a sardonic reflection of the low expectations for women's intellectual and argumentative capacities at the time. The use of the word "minor" is certainly ironic, as Woolf's point––as she herself admits in the second half of this passage––has hugely significant consequences for our understanding of both women and fiction. Indeed,*A Room of One's Own*resulted in a major shift in the way people viewed the literary canon; in response to Woolf's intervention, it became common to search for or imagine the voices of people who would have been able to write had their socioeconomic circumstances been different.

❝ Meanwhile the wineglasses had flushed yellow and flushed crimson; had been emptied; had been filled. And thus by degrees was lit, half-way down the spine, which is the seat of the soul, not that hard little electric light which we call brilliance, as it pops in and out upon our lips, but the more profound, subtle and subterranean glow which is the rich yellow flame of rational intercourse.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

Woolf, now speaking as an unnamed narrator, has been describing a day at a fictional "Oxbridge" college. The narrator attends a luncheon party, where the food is delicious, wine is plentiful, and the attendees delight in the relaxed, idyllic atmosphere. Here Woolf alludes to the idea that we often imagine genius to be a "hard little electric light" that turns on by itself. In this passage, she shows that this is not the best way to understand the production of art and knowledge. Rather, "rational intercourse"––intellectual exchange––that takes place in settings such as the Oxbridge college is often what creates meaningful thought. The implication of this is that if women are excluded from these intellectual settings, they will not be able to produce works of genius or be thought of as "brilliant."

❝ What force is behind that plain china off which we dined, and (here it popped out of my mouth before I could stop it) the beef, the custard and the prunes?

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

Having described the lavish and vibrant luncheon at the men's college, the narrator goes on to depict a supper at Fernham, the fictional women's college. Although theoretically Fernham is simply a women's equivalent of the men's colleges and thus might be thought to contain the same resources, traditions, and atmosphere, the reality is quite different. Unlike at the luncheon at the men's college, the women at Fernham eat simple, unappealing food served on "plain china." While this difference might not at first seem particularly meaningful, in this passage the narrator emphasizes that it is in fact the result of an important "force" in the world: the same force that allows men to engage in productive intellectual dialogue and create great works of literature, while women are hindered from doing so.

❝ Of the two—the vote and the money—the money, I own, seemed infinitely the more important.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 37

Explanation and Analysis

The waiter has brought the bill, and this leads the narrator to explain her financial situation: she receives a yearly allowance of five hundred pounds from her aunt (equivalent to a reasonable annual salary in today's world), which allows

her to live independently. She found out about this allowance on the same day as white women were granted the right to vote in the UK, and in this passage she concludes that––based on her experience––the money has been "infinitely the more important." This is a very significant detail in Woolf's argument, which connects to a debate that remains controversial today.

The right to vote has often been seen as the fundamental factor determining the autonomy of a person within democratic society. However, in this passage Woolf implies that the right to vote is relatively unhelpful if an individual does not also have a degree of independent economic security and freedom from oppressive social forces. Note that the narrator is *not* suggesting that the right to vote is meaningless, or that it would make no difference if women were not able to vote. Rather, she points out that without the freedom provided by an income, a person's agency remains severely restricted.

This argument could either be seen as elitist or anti-elitist, depending on the interpretation. Critics such as Alice Walker have argued that Woolf suggests women without an income are unable to exercise autonomy or impact society; this seems to deny the extraordinary achievements and influence of African American slave women such as Phyllis Wheatley. On the other hand, Woolf's words foreshadow the contemporary feminist argument that legal equality means little if women largely remain economically dependent on men.

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ Perhaps now it would be better to give up seeking for the truth, and receiving on one's head an avalanche of opinion hot as lava, discoloured as dish-water.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator has returned home, feeling disappointed about what she has so far discovered about women and fiction. She wonders if it would be better to abandon her search for truth, and instead embrace "an avalanche of opinion hot as lava." Here Woolf presents a disdainful view of "opinion," reflecting her earlier skepticism about men's writing about women. Yet when it comes to the topic of women, the search for truth is almost equally frustrating, as there is so little knowledge about the actual history of women's lived experience. Despite this frustration and the ambivalence in this passage, however, Woolf does end up concluding that it is better to seek truth than settle for opinion, which––as shown by the narrator's comparison of popular opinion to discoloured "dish-water"––will only ever obscure the true nature of the world.

❝ A very queer, composite being thus emerges. Imaginatively she is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 43

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator has read Professor G.M. Trevelyan's *The History of England* in the hope of finding more information about women's lives throughout history. She is disappointed to find very little concrete detail, and no evidence of women having any influence or importance of their own. On the other hand, as Professor Trevelyan points out, in literature––such as Shakespearean drama––women are represented as being full of "personality and character" and existing at the centre of the narrative action. The narrator does not understand how to reconcile the totally unimportant role women are assigned within history with the complex, interesting, and pivotal part women play in artistic representation.

This is one of several points when the narrator identifies the paradoxical ways in which patriarchal society constructs the role of women. (Another example is when she highlights male authors' obsession with writing about women, yet total lack of interest in listening to women's own accounts of themselves.) Woolf shows that this use of paradox enables the sustained belittling of women without women necessarily understanding or resisting the ways in which they are oppressed.

❝ What one wants, I thought—and why does not some brilliant student at Newnham or Girton supply it?--is a mass of information; at what age did she marry; how many children had she as a rule; what was her house like, had she a room to herself; did she do the cooking; would she be likely to have a servant?

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

Pondering the lack of knowledge about the history of women's lives––and considering the case of the Elizabethan woman in particular––the narrator suggests that what is needed is "a mass of information" about life as a woman during Elizabethan times. Note that the narrator speaks of a singular woman when in fact she is referring to any number of women. This rhetorical strategy allows her to contrast the kind of knowledge she wishes to gain with the kind that already exists. While the details of almost all women's lives have been lost to history *en masse*, and while existing knowledge about women tends to take the form of unfounded, subjective generalizations, Woolf here suggests that the life of each individual woman who has ever lived is worth knowing about in all its mundane detail.

Indeed, it is significant that Woolf refers to domestic questions such as "what was her house like" and "did she do the cooking." Part of the justification for the exclusion of women's lives from the mainstream historical record lies in the fact that women throughout Western history have mostly been confined to the home, and information about home life is not thought to be historically significant. Here the narrator explicitly opposes this assumption, inviting the students in the audience to take up the challenge of investigating the historical facts of women's lived experience and implying that this knowledge will prove useful.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ What a vision of loneliness and riot the thought of Margaret Cavendish brings to mind! as if some giant cucumber had spread itself over all the roses and carnations in the garden and choked them to death.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 62

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator has conceded that some upper class women have historically been able to pursue literary endeavors, and considers individual cases of women who have done so. One such case is Margaret Cavendish, a childless noblewoman who was widely mocked for her attempts to write poetry. The narrator clearly feels sympathy of Margaret, and expresses the idea that if she had been a man she would have been respected for her literary efforts.

Once again, the narrator invokes the concept that intellectual companionship is essential to achievement. Margaret was passionate and dedicated, but because she was a woman she remained isolated and her potential was wasted. The narrator compares Margaret's loneliness and thwarted ambitions to a "giant cucumber" choking to death a bed of roses and carnations. Here the cucumber––a phallic symbol––suffocates the flowers representing Margaret's mind.

❝ All women together ought to let flowers fall upon the tomb of Aphra Behn, [...] for it was she who earned them the right to speak their minds. It is she—shady and amorous as she was—who makes it not quite fantastic for me to say to you to-night: Earn five hundred a year by your wits.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 66

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator has discussed the life of Aphra Behn, a 17th-century writer who is widely thought of as the first professional female writer in England. Unlike the noblewomen the narrator has previously described, Aphra Behn was middle-class and wrote in order to earn money after the death of her husband. The narrator admits that Behn's legacy is not wholly positive, but argues that "all women" should nonetheless honor her, because it was her example that paved the way for women to actually earn a living by writing. The narrator encourages the audience to pursue this goal, all the while implying that it is still extremely difficult. Indeed, she stresses that it is "not quite fantastic" for her to suggest to the young women in the audience that they write professionally, meaning such a career is possible, but still only barely.

She will write of herself where she should write of her characters. She is at war with her lot. How could she help but die young, cramped and thwarted?

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 70

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator has spoken admiringly of Jane Austen, comparing the way in which Austen-as-the-author disappears in her novels to the genius of Shakespeare. She speaks less approvingly of Charlotte Brontë, who––despite her talent––is not able to conceal her own bitterness within her work. According to the narrator, this makes her write "foolishly" and distracts from her characters. However, the narrator empathizes with the reason for Brontë's bitterness, considering she died "young, cramped and thwarted."

Once again, the narrator depicts the experience of being a woman––and especially a woman with creative, intellectual ambitions––as being characterized by a kind of suffocation and lost potential. The word "cramped" echoes the description of the cucumber "choking" the flowers to death in the discussion of Margaret Cavendish, and strengthen's Woolf's point that without a room of her own a woman's talents will end up smothered by her circumstances.

Chapter 5 Quotes

Do not start. Do not blush. Let us admit in the privacy of our own society that these things sometimes happen. Sometimes women do like women.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 82

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator has described a hypothetical contemporary novel by Mary Carmichael called *Life's Adventure*, which contains the sentence "Chloe liked Olivia." Presupposing that the audience might be scandalized by this, the narrator encourages the women listening to remain calm and admit that "sometimes women do like women." This mention of homosexuality is one of the most important moments in the speech. At the time, open discussion of homosexuality was highly taboo; while male homosexuality was widely acknowledged and explicitly forbidden, many people did not believe––or at least did not openly admit––that female homosexuality even existed. However, depictions of lesbianism were beginning to emerge in contemporary literature, and Woolf highlights this as another reason why literature by women was so important.

Note the narrator's specification that lesbianism can be discussed only "in the privacy of our own society." Public representations of lesbianism, for example in Radclyffe Hall's 1928 novel *The Well of Loneliness*, had led to scandal and censure. Another important reason for the existence of intellectual spaces for women, therefore, is that they provided the conditions for lesbianism to be discussed openly. In making this point, the narrator is not assuming that the majority of her audience are lesbians, and that this would be directly meaningful to them in this sense. Rather, lesbianism is presented as a fact about some women's lives that is obscured when intellectual endeavors (and specifically depictions of women) are dominated by men.

Awkward though she was and without the unconscious bearing of long descent which makes the least turn of the pen of a Thackeray or a Lamb delightful to the ear, she had—I began to think—mastered the first great lesson; she wrote as a woman, but as a woman who has forgotten that she is a woman, so that her pages were full of that curious sexual quality which comes only when sex is unconscious of itself.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Mary Carmichael

Related Themes:

Page Number: 93

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator evaluates Mary Carmichael's imaginary novel, assessing how Carmichael measures up against male authors such as William Makepeace Thackeray and Charles Lamb. Although she remains critical of several aspects of Carmichael's writing, she praises the way in which Carmichael writes "as a woman who has forgotten that she is a woman," which she calls "the first great lesson." This is another controversial moment in the speech. Depending on one's interpretation, Woolf might be implying that women

writers should strive to rid themselves of any sense of inferiority to men; perhaps this is what the narrator means when she speaks of "forgetting" one's sex.

On the other hand, some feminist critics have identified this passage as evidence of internalized misogyny. Woolf seems to suggest that women's writing can only be truly excellent if it does not bear any marks of the author's gender. The fact that earlier in the passage the narrator compares Carmichael's work to the male authors Thackeray and Lamb could indicate that the "genderless" standard against which she measure women's writing is in fact a male standard. Indeed, later feminist theorists have argued that it is impossible to forget or conceal the identity of an author, including the author's gender. This view contends that genderless writing is a myth created by the pervasiveness of male authors whose gender is not seen as relevant because it is the norm.

❝ Give her a room of her own and five hundred a year, let her speak her mind and leave out half that she now puts in, and she will write a better book one of these days.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Mary Carmichael

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 94

Explanation and Analysis

Having finished reading Mary Carmichael's imaginary novel, the narrator admits that Carmichael was "no genius," but that given her circumstances the novel was impressive. She adds that if Carmichael were to receive the prescribed allowance of five hundred pounds a year and a room of her own, as well as the freedom to "speak her mind," she would write a much better novel. Again, Woolf seems careful not to overestimate women's existing literary achievements. Instead, she stresses their potential, and emphasizes the idea that the work people produce is highly determined by their social situation. For Woolf, the tragedy of women's place in intellectual history lies less within the notion that female genius has gone unnoticed, and more in the idea that women have not been able to realize the true extent of their own capabilities.

Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ The sight of two people coming down the street and meeting at the corner seems to ease the mind of some strain, I thought, watching the taxi turn and make off.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 96

Explanation and Analysis

The next day, the narrator observes that the people on the street around her seem indifferent to the questions about women and fiction that she has devoted so much time to considering. However, she then notices a man and woman get in a cab together, a sight that captures her attention and eases her mind. She admits it is strange that such an ordinary scene should have this substantial an effect on her, and this leads her to consider the mysterious nature of the human mind.

It seems that what she finds so absorbing about the man and woman is the naturalness of their union. This part of the speech hints at the "strain" that can result in obsession over the gulf between men and women. It is a relief to the narrator to be reminded that––in spite of all the difficult issues to do with gender, power, and freedom that she has been pondering thus far––in reality men and women go about their lives together, largely untroubled by the problems she has been discussing.

❝ The fact is that neither Mr. Galsworthy nor Mr. Kipling has a spark of the woman in him.

Related Characters: Virginia Woolf (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 102

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator has returned to the library and begun reading a book by "Mr. A," who represents the typical male author of the time. She is struck by the fact that Mr. A does seem to write in a consciously gendered way; she observes that in response to the female suffrage movement, contemporary male authors have tended to adopt an egotistical, aggressively masculine tone. Bearing in mind Samuel Taylor Coleridge's point that the best writers are

"androgynous"––meaning a mix of male and female––the narrator argues that John Galsworthy and Rudyard Kipling, two well-known male writers at the time, write in a way that is too masculine and therefore unacceptably narrow.

This passage arguably contradicts the narrator's earlier point that the first great lesson for female authors is to write in a way that implies they have forgotten their gender. Here she seems to indicate that the best writing is indeed gendered, but that it should be a mix of both genders. Either way, her criticism of Galsworthy or Kipling for not containing the "spark" of woman would have been highly controversial at the time. Many would have considered the notion of criticizing celebrated male authors for not being feminine enough so absurd as to be laughable. However, by connecting her argument to that of Coleridge, Woolf suggests that it is not as outlandish as people at the time might otherwise first assume.

❝ Now my belief is that this poet who never wrote a word and was buried at the cross-roads still lives. She lives in you and in me, and in many other women who are not here to-night, for they are washing up the dishes and putting the children to bed.

Related Characters: Virginia Woolf (speaker), Judith Shakespeare

Related Themes:

Page Number: 113

Explanation and Analysis

In the final section of the speech, Woolf has dropped the narrator persona and is speaking as herself. Having reviewed several of the main issues of the speech and responded to anticipated criticism, she returns to the character of Judith Shakespeare, "this poet who never wrote a word." Although Judith's story reflects Woolf's rather pessimistic depiction of women whose ambitions were suffocated before they could ever be realized, Woolf ends on a hopeful note by implying that Judith "still lives" within herself and the audience, as well as other women who remain at home attending to domestic tasks.

Woolf implies that women are connected to one another across the barriers of history, geography, and socioeconomic class, and that this connection inspires women to have a sense of duty to each other.On one hand, this is uplifting and inspirational, a silver lining to the tragic story of Judith Shakespeare and the countless other women whose lives and ambitions have been thwarted by sexism. On the other hand, it is possible that Woolf is being overly optimistic here in proposing a supposedly universal connection between women. Critics of *A Room of One's Own* have pointed to the fact that Woolf provides a sense of hope to young, educated, upper-class women, but promises nothing to other women other than vague references to female solidarity. Such promises might make little difference to the lives of women who remain socially, politically, and economically oppressed, with no hope of achieving independence or autonomy over their own lives.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

Woolf has been asked to speak about Women and Fiction to a group of female students from the Cambridge colleges of Newnham and Girton. She explains how she came to think about these themes as expressed in the title "A Room of One's Own" when she sat down to think about the subject. She considers what one means by "Women and Fiction", thinking that the most interesting idea will be to consider all aspects intertwined, including women writers and fiction *about* women.

From the outset of her lecture, we are made aware of the pressure that has come upon Woolf since she was asked to impart wisdom on the subject of women and fiction. The first pages are full of her wondering how to begin, what method to use, and with her doubts that she will be able to impart anything at all. This all reveals how important the subject is to her, and how personal, and implies that what we are about to read is a personal story and not a political debate.

She soon realizes that she will not be able to offer any truth on the matter. She can only offer her opinion, that a women needs money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction. She can show how she came to this opinion and, through this journey, her audience may be able to draw their own conclusions. She will use the method of fiction to describe this journey, since fiction is their subject, and has invented her setting "Oxbridge" from two recognizable settings, Oxford and Cambridge. She has also invented an "I" voice with which to tell the story. This "I" could be any woman, she says, sitting on a riverbank near a college.

Woolf is open about how she plans to approach her argument—through fiction rather than overt argument claiming to impart truth. By explicitly stating that she is not attempting to state the truth but rather to describe her own personal journey, she creates a sense of intimacy with the reader, as if she has no more wisdom on the subject than they do. So, by approaching the issue through fiction, where her narrator represents every woman, Woolf gives her audience the sense that they are joined together in a collective narrative.

The narrator muses as she sits on this bank, about the nature of her mind, how it attaches itself to a thought and obsesses over it. One particular thought distinguishes itself from the rest and the narrator tries to capture it, like catching a fish. This idea becomes very exciting and precious to her and she tries to keep it from slipping away. She finds herself walking rapidly over a lawn and is soon apprehended by a Beadle, a guard, who tells her that only Fellows and Scholars are allowed on the grass. She obeys and walks on the gravel instead, not yet indignant about the injustice of the reserved lawn, but notices that her precious "fish" has disappeared.

The narrator uses the image of the fish to visualize the process of thinking. The fish is both a concrete thing and yet slippery and hard to grasp. The way she treasures the thought, pursues it with determined excitement, striding across the lawn in order to keep the thought safe until she can write it down, shows how she values thoughts—and thought—above all else. Yet her efforts to catch and hold onto the thought are thwarted by the beadle—who is both a man and a guard of the university, and who therefore represents the way that the institution of the university is protected by men for men (the scholars and fellows), excluding women in the process, and how this exclusion stops women from being able to pursue their thoughts as men can.

She carries on her way and a certain essay by Charles Lamb comes to her mind. This essay muses about how inconceivable it is that Milton's poetry ever had any word changed. The narrator remembers that Lamb came to Oxbridge and his essays are kept in a library not far from where she is walking. Thackeray's "most perfect" novel, *Esmond*, is also kept there. The narrator excitedly imagines finding in these manuscripts some key to the authors' intent, but when she arrives at the famous library, she is turned away because she is a woman.

The narrator's thoughts roam across literature, a literary history with which she wants to immerse herself both for the pure enjoyment of pursuing her thoughts and to investigate those works as a way of delving into the minds of those authors and, in so doing, improve her own mind and writing. But again her status as a woman stands against her and she is shut out, not only from the physical library building, but from the literary history that she so much wants to be a part of.

The narrator leaves the scene in anger. She considers what to do instead but before she can decide she hears organ music issuing from a chapel nearby. This time she doesn't wish to approach, imagining she'll be turned away, and tries to appreciate the outside comings and goings of the congregation.

The narrator's initial anger turns to a kind of grudging acceptance as she now decides not even to enter the Church and so to avoid being stopped once again because she is a woman. In choosing to remain outside she does gain a certain perspective that the men who can enter don't have, but she has given in to being an outsider to this culture (and a somewhat bitter outsider at that for all the exclusion she has experienced).

She thinks about how such a grand collection of buildings exists – it is because of the constant flow of money that the Oxbridge men are born into and then earn after they graduate. This money goes into scholarship and traditions, repairs and luxuries. The college has sustained itself in this way first from the very first Kings and noblemen to the modern scholars. The narrator is stopped in her thoughts by the clock's strike. It is time for lunch and she heads to a luncheon party at the college. She describes the sumptuous spread of food and wine in great detail, and takes special delight in describing that "rich yellow flame" of intelligent, unhurried conversation.

The college is described like a perfectly functional, self-preserving organism or machine. It has flourished for so long that it seems to renew itself, fuelling itself by taking in funds and workmanship from its male members and churning out the educated male brains that are able to then fund and work to keep preserving it. Women have no access to a cycle like this, no foundation on which to base it.. Consequently, the narrator is astonished and delighted by the feast of food and conversation she finds.

Content, she moves to a window seat after lunch and notices a cat without a tail, strolling past the window. This cat reminds her of the lunch party, which she thinks is also missing something fundamental. She tries to figure out what this something is. In order to find out, she recalls the lunch parties of the past, before the war, and remembers the guests making collectively a kind of humming noise, which she realizes is quite poetic and can be put to the verse of Tennyson.

The tailless Manx cat is a symbol of how society has been transformed since the horrors of the First World War, and despite the pleasures of the party the narrator senses this same lack in the conversation around her. By defining this lost something as poetic or musical—the artistic humanities—seems to indicate that Woolf sees the terrible mechanization of the war, which took so many lives like a kind of great killing machine, has cut off the present from the more idyllic, more human past.

Thinking of men and women humming Tennyson at lunchtime makes the narrator burst out laughing, and she has to excuse herself and explain that it was the strange cat that amused her. The party breaks up and the guests head home. The narrator walks towards the imaginary women's college "Fernham" and, with plenty of time before supper, thinks again about Tennyson's lines and then a similarly beautiful verse of Christina Rossetti's.

The narrator's thoughts about Tennyson seem so ludicrous to her that she can't possibly share them with her friends despite her love of good conversation. Yet, it is obvious from her thoughts that she herself hums and thinks in verse and does things in a melodious way, connecting her to that past before the war. Meanwhile, it's worth noting that there are colleges for women, separate from those for men.

The narrator believes that these verses are so beautiful because they make one recall feelings of the past, of past luncheon parties for example. The reason that modern poetry has trouble finding the same beauty is because it cannot evoke memories in the same way. She wonders when people stopped "humming" at lunch. Was it after the war? Perhaps the sight of such stupidity and ugliness made people stop humming. While busily thinking about the difference between truth and illusion, the narrator misses the turn to Fernham, the women's college, so that she must retrace her steps.

The difference between the nostalgic effect of the poetry of the past and the challenge of modern poetry leaves the narrator feeling disillusioned and detached from the art form that she loves so much. Again she shows poetry to be a direct product of the life and times of its poets. While she is thinking generally about society here—about how the suffering of the war has affected people's ability to write and connect to poetry—she is also setting the stage for much of the exploration of the rest of the book: if suffering and stupidity of war have affected society's ability to create poetry, then is it any wonder that women—who have for so long been treated as inferior—have produced difficult, twisted poetry.

Finding herself at Fernham College, the October splendor of colors in the twilight bring a romantic mood to the gardens and the narrator thinks she spots the famous feminist Jane Harrison. But she is interrupted from her exciting academic reverie by the arrival of her soup for dinner. As she did with the luncheon, the narrator describes her supper at the women's college in great detail, but this meal is much humbler. Not only is the height of the feast a bowl of prunes and custard, but the conversation is also lacking.

The narrator initially depicts the fictional women's college here as an almost mythical place, a utopia of natural beauty from the gardens and twilight, all associated with the powerful figure of feminism, Jane Harrison. But that image is compromised when the narrator is confronted with the meager supper of prunes and custard and lacking conversation at dinner. The men's college's bright conversation and rich meal stands in stark contrast to the women's situation even in an atmosphere of progress for women, which the mere existence of the women's college represents. At the same time, the fact that it is a women's college, separate, again shows how women are kept outside of that male society.

The narrator and her friend Mary Seton retire to a sitting room and "repair some of the damages" by discussing people. But the narrator's mind is haunted by the image of the masons and money-makers that founded and preserved the men's college. She guides the conversation towards the problem of the women's colleges. Mary Seton recites the financial history of her college, which basically involves constant and belittling fundraising efforts.

The image of the superior men's college—in construction and in finances-- haunts the narrator's experience at Fernham. In contrast, the narrator and Mary Seton recognize that their own college is just trying to tread water—that it lacks the tradition that could provide a foundation for the women to focus on what they want to. Instead, they must focus on just keeping the college alive with fundraising efforts.

The narrator considers what their mothers had been doing that stopped them creating a legacy, with colleges and scholarships like the men had. She realizes that it was family life – there wouldn't even be a Mary Seton if her mother had wanted to create a legacy, or Mary would have had to have given up the pleasures of her childhood, which depended on her mother. But, to hypothesize about the legacy their mothers would have made is useless – it was impossible for them to earn money.

And now the narrator comes to the crux of it, to the source of the difference between the men's college's rich intellectual history versus the relative paucity of the women's college in those things. Family life: having and raising kids. Women must bear and care for children, and doing so takes so much time and energy that there simply is no way for women to have the time to build the same intellectual and financial tradition as men. And then the narrator adds the kicker: not only do women not have the time because of their domestic duties, society doesn't allow them to occupy roles that make money. Even if Mary Seton's mother had wanted to forgo having a family and focus on building a legacy, she couldn't—because she has no way to make enough money to earn the money needed to allow the independence required for such legacy-building work.

Putting blame aside, the narrator and Mary Seton gaze out of the window at the awe-inspiring college buildings, and ponder the generations of penniless mothers. The narrator remembers all the sights and feelings of her day, and how unpleasant it was to be locked out of the library that morning, but eventually decides she must "roll up the crumpled skin of the day" and retires to bed.

As she predicted, the narrator has found that truth, cause, and blame are difficult to attribute in the case of women and fiction. This brings her very early on in her argument to the realization that she will have to find some other way to reconcile the question. So, gazing at the scene of her subject, she lets her feelings and sensations come to the fore.

CHAPTER 2

Leaving Oxbridge behind, the narrator finds that the appropriate sequel to her first lecture is a visit to the British Museum in London, in quest for the "essential oil" of truth. Her Oxbridge day had started off a barrage of questions in her mind about the poverty of her sex, and for these big questions, she feels she needs the unprejudiced wisdom of books.

We started off at the Oxbridge colleges, which symbolize the elite academic circle that the narrator wishes to join and now, the full scale of the problem becomes apparent as she must journey to the capital city of England—London—and the archetypal setting of learning and knowledge, the British Museum.

The narrator arrives through a wet city day to the doors of the library and as she enters, under the dome which seems to hold all knowledge under it, she beholds the extent of the library, and sees that amongst all the books written by men are hardly any written by women. She is almost overwhelmed by the sheer amount of paper before her. And one other thing that becomes clear is that all kinds of men, with degrees, without degrees, novelists and historians, have all written extensively on the subject of women.

The narrator describes the library as if it brightens up the darkness of the London streets. This is how she sees knowledge and thought. But her description also hints that it is a very masculine building –the dome is depicted as the bald head of a professor. The overwhelming number of books written by men alienates her, and there is the complicating factor that while there are few women authors, an increasing number of the books written by men are about women.

Yet on the subject of men under the letter M, women did not have the same presence. She questions why men would be so endlessly interested in women and selects several volumes for her task. But she finds that, unlike the young researcher next to her, who grunts with satisfaction at finding the oil of truth every few minutes, she has not been trained for research. Her mind boggles with questions. The index of topics regarding the poverty of women seems endless and endlessly bleak.

Woolf uses the image of the library shelves to show visually how absent women authors have been in history and in literature, but also how those male authors write more often on the subject of women than on the subject of men. She seeks to get to the bottom of this difference through research, but in doing so reveals one of the reasons that books by women are so rare: lack of education afforded to women, which makes the narrator unable to compete with the young male researcher next to her.

The narrator notices an interesting contradiction in the views of these male writers on the topic of women. While one thinks that women have no character at all, another believes they are the very height of humanity – how do we account for this discrepancy? Meanwhile, she also notices that her notes and ideas are scattered and ill-formed. She thinks she might as well have left the books unopened because she hasn't been able to make any conclusions. But she has made a drawing on her paper, of a typical professor, bejowled and angrily stabbing his paper.

The way women are praised one moment and insulted the next in the history books exposes how little control they have over their own history. There are no women voices to dissent or fight back, so the name of woman is thrown around for one man's use after another. The consequence is that women's existence is unclear and her legacy completely controlled by men. This lack of control comes out in the narrator's subconscious angry doodle.

The narrator realizes that she has expressed her own anger in this portrait, and tries to locate where this anger had come from. She remembers that its source is the title of the professor's manuscript "the mental, moral and physical inferiority of the female sex". Looking around the library, at the unattractive breed of male scholars, she feels a vanity and an injustice at being thought inferior. She is relieved to find the source of her anger, but what about the professor's anger? Where has that come from? She figures that all of these books about women have been written in the "red light of emotion" and not the "white light of truth" and considers them useless for her purposes.

The narrator has come to a very important point of her argument, simply by describing her firsthand experience of the library. She has, first, located her own sense of anger, which represents the anger of all women, at being called inferior and not being able to argue against it despite what she sees as its obvious fallacy. Yet she has also come to the realization that the men writing these books, too, are angry. While she knows the source of her anger, though, she has yet to understand the source of the men's anger.

Still thinking about the topic of male anger, the narrator leaves the library to get lunch at a restaurant. While she eats, she reads a newspaper. It is overrun with headlines that show the "inferiority" of women, men fulfilling every role in politics and sport and the women belittled. The anger of men is detectable here too despite their obvious authority.

The library represents the literary world and now the newspaper widens the view of the gap between men and women to a "real world" national scale beyond the walls of academia. The newspaper shows that the societal sense of female inferiority, and the male anger that the narrator detects toward women, occurs in all classes, all places, and is occurring constantly.

Perhaps, the narrator thinks, it is to do with their power that they are so angry – in order to have confidence in their position of superiority, they constantly endeavor to make women more inferior, perhaps. This puts in a new light many moments of her life, where men have seemed indignantly offended by feminism. She decides that women through time have served as a kind of magnifying mirror for men to view their size and worth in, and if women start telling the truth, men will see themselves diminished and unfit.

The narrator has begun to shed more light on men and the source of their anger toward women. Now she realizes that maybe men are to be pitied too. The anger that they show outwardly toward feminists can be seen as insecurity—because men need women to be inferior in order to maintain their own sense of superiority—just as her own anger comes from her insecurity about the inferiority of women. At the same time, by identifying these mutual senses of inferiority, the narrator is beginning to see men and women as sharing something vital.

The narrator's thoughts are interrupted by the waiter handing her the bill for lunch. She takes this opportunity to explain her financial circumstances to her audience. She inherited a yearly allowance of five hundred pounds from her aunt, whom she names Mary Beton, and lives very comfortably on this sum without needing male support. She received the news of this legacy on the same day as the vote was given to women and admits that the money was the more significant milestone, giving her a great deal more freedom than the vote.

The narrator confesses that she does not suffer as most women do from lack of funds. She has been arguing that money is instrumental in allowing women to write fiction but now she shows from personal experience how money has allowed her basic freedoms like paying bills and being able to travel. In saying that having money gives her more power than being given the right to vote she is making a strong point, since the right to vote is often held up as the embodiment of freedom. The narrator clearly disagrees, and makes the point that those lacking money can't act as they choose, or pursue what they wish, but must instead always be trying to find enough money to get by.

Women's occupations are generally tedious and difficult and earn little money, and the narrator's temper has been therefore remarkably improved by her steady income and it also made her more sympathetic to men. Perhaps men too are victims of society and have had faulty educations. She sees that both men and women are driven by instincts beyond their control. In fact, she finds that her five hundred a year has given her the ability to see things as they are, without prejudice or opinion.

The narrator's financial security makes her see things in a different light. She realizes how much easier it makes the job of writing and she's also able to sympathize with men, instead of feeling bitter. This implies that if other women had financial freedom, they too could share this perspective and see the world more clearly, their worldview less constricted and twisted by their lack of freedom. Later, the narrator will discuss how this typically narrow ad embittered worldview of women—caused by their lack of money—affects the novels they write.

The narrator heads home, where "domesticity prevailed", the house painter and maid working hard for the household. In her present state of mind, the narrator considers that the relative value of these occupations has changed in modern times – it is no longer really possible to say which is better. And she guesses that in a hundred years, the state of women's occupations will be very different again, a revelation that has numerous implications for women and mothers, and fiction.

The narrator has been out into the world and found that the poverty of women can be found everywhere, but as she returns home, to the domestic realm, to the sight of a traditionally stratified scene, where men's and women's occupations have different values, it occurs to her that change is not only possible but has occurred because where in the past a house painter would be more valued than a maid, that is no longer the case. And if gendered occupations have the power to change in value, so does fiction.

CHAPTER 3

The narrator returns home disappointed that she hasn't found some nugget of truth with which to explain women's poverty compared to men. She thinks she needs a historian, who records facts, to describe the conditions of women through history. She considers the Elizabethan period of literature, which is full of well-known men like Shakespeare but for which accounts of women's lives are almost non-existent. She describes fiction as being connected to life but as delicately as a spider-web and, in Shakespeare's case, almost imperceptibly.

By turning from fiction, the art of artifice, to history, the art of facts, the narrator finds that women are just as poor in life as in literature. It is not just that they are missing from the spines of the library books as authors but that they are missing from the books themselves as individual subjects. In fact she describes whole history of womanhood, vast as it must be, as a kind of black hole beside the extensive and well-documented history of manhood.

The narrator goes again to books, this time a *History of England*, and finds a mere few facts about women over the span of centuries, and these all involve men in some way. Yet women were not lacking in personality, claims the historian. When you look at Shakespeare's plays, this is obvious – Cleopatra, Desdemona, all are full of character. A fascinating inconsistency appears in the female sex. In the imagination, she is astounding and varied; in life and in history, she is the property of her husband and basically invisible. What one must do to get a real idea of this woman is to consider history and poetry at once, but in the case of the Elizabethan woman, there is no history written that will provide this perspective.

The impression one gets of women from reading Trevalyan's history book is of a creature that only really exists in the realms of marriage and divorce. There are legal descriptions of men's rights related to their wives but of women themselves, practically nothing. Then the narrator conjures the fictional realm, where women have a far more colorful, noticeable existence. She implies that the real woman of history is somewhere in between these two realms.

Someone needs to put together a history of women, with all the missing facts, about what she ate, what she did, and the narrator suggests that a young woman in the audience might try to accomplish it. For it is ridiculous even to ask the question about women and fiction in the Elizabethan age, without knowing anything about women themselves.

Here, the narrator exposes her purpose for the lecture by addressing the women in the audience with a call to action. She goads them to do what other women have not done and write a history of women, encouraging them but also placing the pressure of responsibility on their shoulders.

Trevelyan, the writer of the *History of England*, claims that most girls were married by sixteen, and so the narrator can hardly imagine one of them being able to write the plays of Shakespeare. She invents a woman, Shakespeare's sister, named Judith Shakespeare, to investigate what would have happened if a woman had Shakespeare's gift. While William was going to school and hunting, then working as an actor and writer at a London theatre, his equally gifted sister stayed at home, mending clothes and under pressure from her family to marry early.

Judith Shakespeare is a symbol of everything the narrator is trying to describe in the essay. In Judith's story, the narrator exposes the difference that intellectual and financial freedom makes to creative freedom and the difference creative freedom makes to poetry. Unlike her brother William, Judith faces a life of wasted talent, a waste enforced by the very structure and expectations of society. William's gender gives him many advantages—education, connections, opportunities—resulting in a life that Judith could never dream of, and experiences that allow him to further develop his talent.

Judith had a loving family and did not want to disappoint her father so she was forced to secretly stow away to escape her marriage and ran away to London. But when she arrived she was laughed away from the theater. One actor-manager took pity on her and she ended up becoming pregnant by him, which effectively ended her chances for any kind of writing life. So Judith committed suicide. This is how the narrator believes the story would go.

Things get worse and worse for Judith as she grows up. She is forced to abandon her family to follow her desire to write and act, but even having done that no one will let her act. Dejected, she starts a relationship with the one man who is kind to her. While this relationship does not affect the man, it makes her pregnant—highlighting the intrinsic biological unfairness of love and relationships. Society and biology conspire to doom Judith's opportunities so that she never gets the chance to develop her talent. And so she kills herself even as her brother becomes a triumph.

In fact the narrator believes that a woman like Judith, with all Shakespeare's talents, would never have existed. But women must have had a kind of genius of their own. There must have been women, the ones burned for witchery or shunned by their communities for example, with *potential* for writing. She thinks "Anon" (i.e. "Anonymous") was probably a woman. What is certain, she says, is that any woman born with such a gift would certainly have gone mad or melancholy. If Judith had survived, her writing would have been "twisted and deformed" and she certainly would have disguised herself as Anon or a masculinized name. It is not as natural for women to seek fame as men do.

The narrator has vividly painted the picture of Judith Shakespeare and gone through the whole journey of her life from birth to suicide, regretful that she was never able to put pen to paper professionally and remained invisible in history. But though we can regret the lack of fiction that came from Elizabethan women, the narrator argues that even if they had *been able to produce works of fiction, they would have been awful pieces of work because they would be deformed by the trials and social obstacles she had to overcome in order to become a writer. The narrator seems to be telling her audience that women have had to wait for the right time to emerge as writers.*

It is obvious that women poets suffered a torn, disturbed state of mind. But how did male writers feel? Though we know that Shakespeare's state of mind must have been perfect for poetry when he sat down to write King Lear, we don't actually know anything about it. As time has gone on, we have become more informed, from writers' personal memoirs and diaries, and we learn from this modern confessional trend that production of a work of genius was a huge, difficult undertaking. If the writer had any distraction, the work would suffer. And for women, such distractions were so much more prevalent than for men, and works of genius therefore basically impossible.

From snippets of the history that lies behind the major works of literature, the narrator argues that men's lives are uniquely suited to writing and writing works of genius in one critical way: society was structured in such a way that men could work undisturbed. Even though we know very little about women's lives, we do know that they must have been fraught with domestic errands and duties and difficulties that meant they were regularly distracted, making it impossible to muster the sustained concentration required to write works of genius.

She charges the psychologists of Newnham and Girton to find out the effect of discouragement on an artist and how they need to be nourished to be able to write. Certainly many male authors have opinions on the subject. One Oscar Browning who used to teach at women's colleges had the opinion that even the best-educated woman was inferior to the worst man. Now with the benefit of knowing more about the minds and lives of these male authorities, we can see them as more human and not be threatened by their opinions, but fifty years ago, these opinions would have ruled.

Here, the narrator argues that in a society where women's inferiority was taken as a given, there is of course the natural result that women come to internalize this belief, and that such self-conception of inferiority will naturally affect women's ability to write great literature because they won't even be able to conceive of themselves as doing so. She adds that now that it is clear that much of the male insistence on female inferiority is actually defensive, so that men can continue to feel superior, that such opinions are easier for women to avoid internalizing, but that this is only recently the case.

We come back to the need for men to feel superior. But the story of women's emancipation is more complicated than that, full of instances of politically-minded women shunning their own opinions. And though the young ladies before her now enjoy their rooms and simple dinners, the women of the past "cried out in agony", because people of genius have always been most effected by the opinions of others.

Now the narrator warns the women that it is not just men that they need to look out for. Through history women have undermined their own cause by submitting to men, by denying the value of their own opinions.

This is especially damaging for an artist, because to create good poetry as Shakespeare did, one must be able to rise above all obstacles and impediments and be "incandescent". The fact that we know nothing about Shakespeare's state of mind is significant evidence of his incandescence – his poetry "flows from him free and unimpeded."

"Incandescent" is a word that the narrator uses repeatedly in the essay to describe the successful poet. It is a magical quality that implies an ability to ascend above mundane concerns and in so doing see the world in a clear-eyed, universal way, so that the poetry within the poet burn brightly, un-warped by the poet's mundane concerns or bitterness earned by hard experience.

CHAPTER 4

Continuing from her explanation of Shakespeare's 'incandescence', the narrator shows how it's practically impossible for a woman to possess the same quality. Just look at how women have appeared through history, she says. They've always been pictured in cramped rooms that would never inspire fiction.

Women's lives are so full of toil and practicality that they represent the opposite of this magical quality incandescence. And because their lives have been so toilsome, they have no frame of reference to inspire fiction.

But the narrator does admit that women of higher standing have better luck. Men react more favorably to a writing countess than a writing working class mother. Countesses and ladies had comparative financial freedom but they had to face ridicule and risk "being thought a monster". She gives the example of Lady Winchilsea, a childless noblewoman, who wrote poetry but could never express the incandescence of male writers because her poems were so full of indignant, bitter lines about how women are "debarred from all improvements of the mind" and so on. Amid this bitterness is pure, beautiful poetry, but it is undercut by anger.

The narrator is making a duel argument about the impact of the structure of society on women writers. First, is that most women don't have the opportunity to write because of a lack of financial freedom and resulting domestic obligations that intrude as constant interruptions. Second, the narrator argues that even those few women who do have financial freedom—such as Lady Winchilsea—can't reach incandescence because their poetry is marred by too much bitterness from the way that they are blocked from high literary culture (just as the narrator was barred from entering the library earlier) and that their work is met with an instinctual ridicule from men. Such bitterness—even if legitimate—poisons poetry, as the narrator sees it.

The narrator is imagining what Lady Winchilsea's comforts and trials must have been like because very little is known about her. Her lines speak of sadness but she was likely viewed by male readers as trivial. She was often ridiculed by male satirists. One satirist cold her a "blue stocking with an itch for scribbling." The narrator is fascinated by this idea and wishes she had access to more information so that she could form a proper picture of Lady Winchilsea.

The example of Lady Winchilsea demonstrates that even when a woman was the highest of high society, she was not taken seriously. No matter how serious Lady Winchilsea's sentiments and subjects in her poetry, men instinctively didn't take her seriously simply because she was a woman.

The narrator then turns to her next example, Margaret of Newcastle, who, like Lady Winchilsea was noble and childless and whose writings show an even more unveiled anger. Her poetry is "congealed" and "higgledy-piggledy" when it could have been beautiful, and what's more, she was laughed at by those around her and led a lonely existence until she had a reputation for madness. Dorothy Osbourne is next. In her letters, she admits that she cannot imagine being mad enough to start writing books. Letters are the extent of her writing career, yet they betray a talent for sentences.

The narrator presents this short history of women writers as if they are a series of failed experiments. With each example, the twistedness and stiltedness of their fiction gets more pronounced and the fate for women writers seems more doomed. Dorothy Osbourne is not even able to conceive of attempting to write fiction because of the treatment of those women before her who tried, and so her talent is left un-cultivated.

The narrator continues her tirade, now pulling Aphra Behn from the shelf. Behn is unlike the others however. She is not a noblewoman, but a middle-class woman embodying middle-class values of strength and humor. After an unfortunate series of events, she was left penniless and husbandless and had to make a living for herself. So she turned to writing. But the mere fact of her having a career at all is far more famous than anything she wrote, and far from being a role-model for young women, she was so ostracized by society that she made writing seem like the pursuit of disturbed women.

The narrator presents Aphra Behn as a rare example of a woman without upper-class means making a living as a writer. She is a role model and should have been a real inspiration, with her virtues of humor and strength and her dedication to fiction. But society did not allow her to become an inspiration, because it was not ready to admit a middle-class writer into its ranks, creating a tragic situation where Behn was seen as disgraceful rather than admired.

But Behn did make writing for money an option for other women, and gradually women writers started appearing in the history books towards the end of the eighteenth century. What followed were objectively important books like *Pride and Prejudice* and *Jane Eyre*, which themselves changed the status of women writers by providing a growing body of work, just as men have always had a large body of work by other men to inspire them and provide them with an insight into collective experience – this all leads to good fiction, the narrator claims.

Having described example after example of failed novels and tragic lives, the narrator shows how women and fiction has progressed. It may seem by looking individually at these examples like things haven't progressed at all, but they have, gradually and steadily. This is an important point for the narrator to make before her impressionable young audience of women college students, because it shows them that progress is worth striving for.

Writers like George Eliot and Jane Austen ought to "let flowers fall upon the tomb of Aphra Behn", for their freedom. By the nineteenth century, library shelves were filling up with middle-class women's books, but they were nearly all novels and there was a notable lack of poetry. These women were all very different, had different lives and voices, yet all had the same tendency for novels. The narrator theorizes that this focus on novels resulted from the concentration it takes to write poetry; comparatively, novels can be written in spurts, which means that they could be written despite the common distractions of family life.

Women have started to write more but they are still not free when it comes to how and what they write. Women have fitted their voices into the form of the novel, because the process of writing the novels fit better with the social domestic obligations and their attendant interruptions. So, in a way, women are still as bound to their gender as before. In order for them to start writing good poetry like Shakespeare's, women's collective lives would have to evolve differently.

The narrator explains that middle-class women had been trained for centuries for novels, by having to observe and understand so much of human behavior and emotion, but Austen, the Brontes, and Eliot were not novelists by nature – their talents carved them out for poetry and history.

The narrator describes the way women have fallen into the job of novel-writing not through a creative choice but because it is the only form that will fit their lives. So women's ownership of the novel form is not a sign of freedom, but a sign of their constraint.

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* is a good novel, the narrator believes, even though Austen wasn't proud to be writing and had to hide the manuscript when she heard anyone approach. And yet when you read the novel, it seems like Austen has become incandescent like Shakespeare, has shed herself in a way. Perhaps this is because Austen didn't covet the freedom of men and that her fiction suited her situation.

Books about Jane Austen's life have painted it as entirely domestic, with a writing desk as the only clue to Jane's career. She reportedly did all her work in the family sitting room, somewhat secretly, hiding her work whenever someone entered and never able to remove herself from distractions. But it was her peace with this lifestyle—her lack of bitterness about what was being denied to her--that allowed her to be a rare women who's writing sometimes reached the level of incandescence.

But Charlotte Bronte has a very different relationship to her written voice. The narrator quotes a passage from *Jane Eyre*, showing how unfulfilled and embittered the narrative is, showing how Bronte was unable to shed her own life when writing. The most unfortunate thing about Bronte, the narrator thinks, is that she knew what freedom, travel, and education could have done for her and her work, but never was able to experience or profit from those things.

The narrator uses Charlotte Bronte to show how extraordinary it is that Jane Austen was able to triumph over her situation by accepting it. Bronte by contrast was aware of her misfortune and never accepted it, and this bitterness came through in her fiction. Consequently she was never able to achieve in the way Austen achieved.

The narrator goes on to explore what it takes for a novel to rouse the emotions in the way that *War and Peace* for example does. She believes it is to do with the shape of the novel and the ability of its emotional content to reflect something of life. If the novel has only moments of reflection but fails to be a whole, it "comes to grief".

The narrator chooses War and Peace *as her idea of a perfect novel. It is an illuminating choice because it's subject matter—war and peace—are big elemental ideas that are traditionally the domain of men. Yet the narrator does not focus on the subject matter as the key to the book, but rather it's "wholeness," which seems to imply its ability to reflect* all *of life.*

Most novels, she says, come to grief, but does this have anything to do with the sex of the writer? She thinks that women writers' integrity has been compromised by the authority of men; male values prevail so male writers have found reflecting real life easier. Women have found it almost impossible to write without filling their pages with anger, defensiveness, or submission. Only Austen and Emily Bronte were able to write with unapologetic, uncompromised female voices, as if deaf to the "persistent voice" of the patriarchy.

The narrator notes that most novels fail to measure up to this criteria, but wonders if the women's novels that fail do so, in particular, because their authors are women. She answers this question by stating that the bitterness ingrained in women of literary ambition by the restrictions placed on them by the patriarchal structure of society thwarts their attempt to attain "wholeness" in their writing. She furthers this argument by referencing the two women whom she sees as exceptions—Austen and Emily Bronte—who somehow were able to avoid bitterness, to write as women without bitterness.

The narrator quotes a passage from the New Criterion about how female novelists should only write according to their limitations. She is surprised to find that this was written in 1928 and not a century earlier. With the pressure of male opposition still facing women, the literary tradition remains closed off to them. They don't have any access to a "common sentence," that men have access to, the shared rhythm and form that unites male writers in a collective.

Again the narrator shows that though society has progressed in terms of giving women the right to vote and the opportunity to get an education, the patriarchal judgment on women writers still weighs as heavily. She puts this down to the lack of a "common sentence", implying that if women had a large body of work around which to cohere and unite—and which proved their skill to men—they would be immune to the sort of male judgment that currently warps women's their fiction.

And naturally this "sentence" leads to whole forms of writing, the poem and the play, for example – forms created by men and continued by men. The novel is different in that it is newer and more open to women, but the narrator imagines that as women become freer in society, they will open up the form of the novel also, and find room for their poetry, or a form as yet unfounded. Here, the narrator leaves off, with hope that in the future, the forms of women's writing will be shaped to the lives of women.

The narrator uses this idea of the collective sentence to show how whole forms and traditions in literature, indeed the whole of literature itself, has been dominated by men because they have had a legacy of male writers to follow. She ends on a hopeful note, by suggesting that as women have gained freedom they have begun the process of building this legacy and that in this freedom and with this legacy they may be able to write in new forms, that are unique to women and expressions of "whole" women's lives.

CHAPTER 5

Now the libraries have many books by women. Women have written on all kinds of subjects, in all kinds of form, even occasionally economics and philosophy. Novels are still the main pursuit but maybe they have a different flavor now, maybe they are more artful and have less of women's struggling within them. To investigate, the narrator opens a novel by Mary Carmicheal called "Life's Adventure". Though this hypothetical text is a debut, it must be read as the latest in a series of works by women, as all works of fiction exist as part of their traditions and libraries.

The narrator has spent the essay so far showing how women have had to manage without a literary history of their own, with such negative consequences. Now she asserts that this legacy is starting to exist, and that contemporary women's novels can and must be measures against this legacy and seen as progressing from it. To explore current novels by women and their relationship to the legacy of women writers, she creates an imaginary one by Mary Carmichael

She starts reading Mary Carmicheal's novel, and finds at first that its sentences are somehow broken, do not flow like music as Jane Austen's did. The narrator wonders why Mary has gone against Austen's sentences, whether she is protesting against being called "sentimental" as so many women are.

As things have improved for women writers, it should be easier for a woman like Mary to avoid the anger that was found in earlier writers like Bronte and Behn, but the narrator finds that another problem has arrived - new writers are avoiding emotion and lyrical sentences for fear of sounding "sentimental" which men often associate with being "womanly."

She reads on and finds that as well as breaking the sentence, Mary has also "broken the sequence". Just when the reader expects one thing, Mary has provided something quite different. This monumental surprise comes when the novel states "Chloe liked Olivia". The narrator realizes that this might be the first time that literature has recognized the truth that sometimes women do like women. How incredible it would have been for one of Shakespeare's heroines to "like" another woman, instead of feeling jealousy or sisterhood.

The narrator has been reading Mary's novel critical of its awkward style and structure but now she finds that despite its flaws, the novel has made a positive social leap as well. Mary Carmicheal makes history by confessing that it is possible for a woman to like another woman. This simple truth has been hidden from the world of literature, and now Mary Carmicheal has been able to 'light a torch in that vast chamber where nobody has yet been". As a woman, she has reflected the fullness of life in a new way, in a way Shakespeare, for instance, couldn't and didn't.

Women in literature have always been considered in relation to men, and it is natural that men know very little about the female mind and women know very little about the male. So what is left is a literary history with a very skewed vision of women. The narrator goes on reading, finding that Chloe and Olivia share a laboratory, where they are investigating a cure for anemia.

Because she has confessed that sometimes women like women, Mary Carmicheal has made it possible to have a fictional world in which women exist not in relation to men but instead in relation to other women—the role of men is no longer necessarily central, the standard against which everything is measured.

The narrator holds her breath as she realizes that Mary Carmichael's genius lies in how she deals with the next moment, when Chloe watches as Olivia tidies up and prepares to go home to her husband and children. Here, if Mary has the right lightness of touch, the whole world could be changed, the chamber of women liking women lit up for the first time. Before she reads on, the narrator advises Mary that she must do it subtly, by having Chloe focus on something else.

The narrator sees Mary Carmichael as having given herself the opportunity to reflect the world in true ways that have never been reflected before, and in so doing change the world. Yet the opportunity is just an opportunity. Achieving this change comes down to artistic genius.

The narrator finds herself praising Olivia for her complexity and tells herself off – there's no justification for praising one's own sex for complexity, she says, since historically there are no measures for women's complexity and scientific discoveries are all from the point of view of men. So when the narrator praises Olivia for being "infinitely intricate", she is unable to check her meaning against the writings of the "great men", even though she knows that most of these men had wives, and were inspired by them in such a way that they must have perceived their "intricacy" as a race.

The narrator's self-criticism about thinking of Olivia as being complex stems from the fact that she actually has no historical basis upon which to compare Olivia's complexity to any other women because such complexity was never recorded.

To get a complete view of female intricacy and creativity and be able to write about how a woman feels when she walks into a room, one would have to follow her into hundreds of rooms, since there is so much variety in women that has gone unrecorded. Her creative power differs very greatly from a man's and it would be a huge pity if she started to write like a man because we would miss out on her unique world.

The narrator is arguing that the only way to capture the complexity of women is to attempt to do so over and over and over again, hundreds of times. This is another argument for the need for a literary legacy of books written by women, which would then allow women a reference and foundation that would allow women to write as women., and not to have to try to write like a man.

With this in mind, the narrator warns Mary Carmicheal that by staying outside the viewpoint of Chloe and Olivia, she risks becoming a "naturalist-novelist". There is endless material to observe. The narrator remembers seeing an elderly working class woman strolling at dusk and imagining how the woman would reflect on her life. She would remember battles and historic occasions fought by men but all the similar days of her own domestic duties would disappear from history. All these obscure, unrecorded lives remain to be observed by Mary Carmicheal if she is up to the challenge. She should record her *own* soul too, as well as venturing behind the figure of man and observing him for the first time as he has always observed women.

The "naturalist-novelist" is one who observes from the outside, who shows how things look without really understanding what is essential. By conjuring the anonymous, unexceptional working-class woman and insisting that this woman has a story to be told, the narrator insists on the importance of creating a legacy of women writers. There are innumerable women, ordinary women, young, old, whose lives are just waiting to be recorded into history. In addition, such a legacy would record men from a different perspective at last, in the way that women have always been recorded by men. All this remains to be done and the narrator spurs her audience on to take up the gauntlet.

The narrator stops herself from continuing to tell Mary what she should write, and instead goes back to the novel and reads on, hoping to get away from her prejudices about Mary's broken sentences. She finds that the structure of the novel is also disappointing, always leading her towards something deep and elemental but never quite giving it. She certainly doesn't have the genius of Austen, Bronte, or Winchilsea, but, she has something that they never had, a self-sufficiency, an indifference to men, which opens her work to an unbiased sexual curiosity as if she's "forgotten that she is a woman."

As the narrator returns to Mary Carmichael's imaginary novel, she comes to the conclusion that it lacks the genius to fulfill the possibilities of its revolutionary premise. Carmichael, quite simply, is not the genius that Austen and Bronte were. Yet the narrator also finds much to be hopeful about, because she sees that the changing society has allowed her to write in an unconstrained way: as a person rather than as a woman. The implication is that society as begun to change in ways that make the "wholeness" that distinguishes great novels accessible to women.

As she reads, the narrator waits nervously for the important moment that Mary Carmicheal must show if she is to prove herself. It is a moment of going deeper into the world of her story, of going beyond the shallow surface of appearances. The professors and historians of the male world will be shouting out their advice to her but she must not be distracted. The narrator concludes, having finished the novel, that considering Mary Carmicheal's talent and circumstances, she did well. But in another hundred years, she will write a much better book.

A giant leap has been made for women in Mary Carmicheal's book, but the narrator concedes that in the end, women need a bit more time, that the next *Mary Carmichael will do better, and the one after that will do even better. By referencing the future generations, the narrator emphasizes the responsibilities and possibilities for her audience in this lecture: they are the next generation. They must continue to push forward, ad they will continue Mary Carmichael's progress.*

CHAPTER 6

The next morning, the narrator looks out at the London street and notices that nobody there much cares about Shakespeare's plays, or the topic of Women and Fiction. All are on their own journeys, self-absorbed. But then, as a man and woman meet and get into a cab, the atmosphere changes. The narrator's imagination attaches to this image. Perhaps, she considers, the image symbolizes the uniting of women and men, which eases the contrary mindset she's assumed for composing the lecture.

The narrator mentioned earlier that she instinctively feels that everything in the city is connected like parts of a machine; industry and personal life are occurring hand in hand, but as she looks now out of the window, the city seems disconnected, people going this way and that, uncaring and individual. The sight of one man and one woman getting into a cab has such a powerful soothing effect on this disconnection that she believes that it must hold the key to her argument.

She feels that the mind is a difficult organ, prone to many states of being. Is there a unity of the mind? She asks. Maybe the natural unity she felt when her mind attached to the man and women getting into the cab can be traced to the theory that the two sexes should be in a kind of union after all, that maybe each individual soul is both man and woman.

The narrator uses the image of the man and woman getting into a cab to symbolize the unity of men and women, and the satisfying effect it has on her symbolizes that somehow this unity is right and good. Characteristically, she uses her own feelings to suggest this vital nugget of truth.

Coleridge said that the great mind is androgynous, with feminine and masculine aspects and no fight between the two. The narrator goes to the library again and thinks she has begun to explain the expanse of books written by men about women, that it comes from their sex-conscious age. Never have men been more sex-conscious than when having to face the Suffragette movement.

The narrator sees sex-consciousness as a flaw of their society and their literature. If everyone were at peace with the different sexes and allowed themselves to be both woman and man, then they would not be offended by maleness or femaleness, and men would not have to write books explaining women, or denigrating women. Understanding and respect would naturally exist.

The narrator opens a novel written by Mr. A, a typical male novelist, and is relieved to read the assured, unhindered male voice again. But soon her reading catches on something; it is the incessant "I" word that bothers her. This shape was so dominant in the work that it cast a shadow over it. Mr. A is not incandescent like Shakespeare, he is asserting his superiority and protesting against the equality of the female character to the male. Now after the women's emancipation movement, male writers are creating male-sided fiction. Women, she advises, should not expect to find anything that speaks to them in these male-sided works. Writers like Kipling and Galworthy lack "suggestive power" with which women are able to sympathize and imagine.

Just as women writers through history have unfortunately filled a lot of their fiction with bias and bitterness, she finds that modern men are doing the same. As she expects to find a smooth, confident voice, the "I" which should hide gender instead asserts itself again and again like the angry professor stabbing at his paper. While the women of history feared their inferiority, men in modern times fear the loss of their superiority at the hands of the suffragettes (women seeking the right to vote and other pro-women reforms). So both sexes suffer and their fiction suffers because of this consciousness about sex.

Going back to the shelves, the narrator gets on to the subject of Italian literature, which she says is suffering from anxiety of being too masculine. She believes that no poetry will come out of such a beast as fascism. But it is not just men that are to blame – it is a combination of both men and women. She goes through a list of writers and tries to weigh up how much of femininity and how much masculinity they were made of.

The narrator uses the example of Italian writing to show that peace between male and female influences is necessary for great literature. The Italian government at the time was fascist, which she sees as being overly masculine as a response to its anxiety about its masculinity, and she believes that no such successful literature can emerge from such a state.

Going to her writing desk, thinking of the first line for *Women and Fiction*, the narrator settles on the most important idea, that it is fatal for a writer to think of his or her sex. Sex-conscious writing "ceases to be fertilized", she claims. A marriage between male and female influences must be made.

The narrator now portrays herself going to her writing desk to write this lecture that she is giving, and settles on the crucial point being that authors must write as people, not as either man or women. Only in the union of men and women can life, or art, be born.

Here, the narrator leaves off and Virginia Woolf returns. She knows that her audience will have listened to Mary's journey with their own perspectives, adding and changing to form their own opinions and detect bits of truth. She anticipates two criticisms. Firstly, they will notice that she gave no evaluation of the comparative value of the sexes, but this was never the aim and she finds trying to measure fiction a futile and quite impossible pursuit.

As Woolf takes over from her fictional narrator, she reminds her audience that what she just related was a subjective account of her experiences. She implies that in reality, things like inferiority and superiority don't exist in any measurable way, and putting values on human things is quite impossible. It is even more impossible to put value on fiction. By reminding them of this, Woolf gives her audience the power to decide for themselves.

The second criticism could be that Woolf has been too concerned with money. Haven't there been poor writers who have risen above their circumstances and shouldn't that be encouraged? To answer this she quotes from *The Art of Writing* by Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, which admits that unfortunately our list of "great" writers is predominantly well-to-do. She furthers this point by saying that while men with intellectual freedom have had the chance to be writers, women have always been poor in terms of the intellectual freedom granted to them.

Woolf is very ready to answer this potential criticism about her materialistic, money-based view of the topic of women and fiction, armed with plenty of evidence. It becomes obvious that the majority of great writers have been wealthy men. It is rare to find a poor man who has made a name for himself in literature. In this way both sexes have been plagued by the need for financial freedom.

Some of the women in front of her may wonder why, then, if it is both so difficult to write fiction and socially dangerous, is Woolf so obsessed with it? Because she loves to read, she says. She charges her audience to write books about everything, to improve fiction, but also philosophy, history, and every other subject, to create influences for other women.

In keeping with the method that she proposed at the beginning of her lecture, Woolf gives us a subjective answer to this question rather than trying to provide objective truth. From her point of view, to have a legacy of women writers would provide her with a world of stories and reading pleasure.

Woolf suggests that her motives are not entirely selfish, though. There is something about writing that is connected to goodness. Uneducated as she is, she doesn't know why, but she knows that when one reads King Lear for example, reality seems to be realer, life is intensified. Her speech is drawing to a close but she knows that convention demands that she make some kind of noble final statement to inspire her audience for the future. It should be something about responsibility and the influence they can have. But Woolf would rather give a "brief and prosaic" message that the young women should be themselves, and shouldn't live for influencing others but instead "think of things in themselves".

The narrator has been battling throughout the essay to describe the difference between individual and common experience and where real truth can be found. Now she finds that in order to give her audience a worthy conclusion, she needs to find a balance between those two things. She does this firstly by saying that the creation of fiction is both selfish and for the common good. And she does it secondly by telling the young women the contradictory message that to create a legacy for women, they should always focus on the work itself.

Woolf acknowledges that women are supposed to hate women. She is expected to end with something disagreeable. But she likes women. Still she mustn't continue praising them in case a professor is hiding in the cupboard behind them, so she goes back to her inspiring final message. She reminds the women that they, as a sex, have never gone into war, never founded a civilization, never written the works of Shakespeare, but while one could explain this with many excuses, it is also true that there are now women's colleges and women's votes; and so she implores her listeners to seize these opportunities.

Woolf has shown her audience how far women have come, from Judith Shakespeare's wretched life to Mary Carmicheal's confession that women like women. But she must still watch her words for fear of professors hiding in cupboards ready to condemn her. She acknowledges that recorded history is driven by great actions by men, and relatively few by women. But she notes also that the world is changing, that women occupy a new place on the world stage, and that women must take advantage of their newfound opportunities.

Finally, Woolf conjures the character of Judith Shakespeare again, who died and lies beneath the omnibuses driving the streets of London. But it is not over for Judith, she claims. Poets live in a different way from other people, and these women of Newnham and Girton colleges to have the opportunity to give Judith the life she never had.

Woolf here transforms Judith Shakespeare, who began as a symbol of the tragic intellectual poverty of women, into a symbol of hope and a call to action for the women in her audience, a suggestion that they have the opportunity, through both life and literature, to give Judith—and, by extension, all the forgotten women— life again, a life that is not a tragedy. In life, they can do so by continuing to build a tradition of literary women and a society that is not patriarchal and which ensures no future woman becomes a Judith. And, through, literature, to write Judith and all of the lost women back into history.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Parfitt, Georgina. "*A Room of One's Own*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 15 Jan 2014. Web. 18 Oct 2019.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Parfitt, Georgina. "*A Room of One's Own*." LitCharts LLC, January 15, 2014. Retrieved October 18, 2019. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/a-room-of-one-s-own.

To cite any of the quotes from *A Room of One's Own* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Woolf, Virginia. A Room of One's Own. Harcourt. 1989.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Woolf, Virginia. A Room of One's Own. San Diego: Harcourt. 1989.